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Publisher's Page

Euphemism in medicine: calling a spade a horticultural implement

An Ontario school board is considering a ban on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* because it views the bard's depiction of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, as antisemitic; the South African government has banned Anna Sewell's children's classic *Black Beauty* because of its title, and the Inner London Education Authority has ordered that Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* and *Benjamin Bunny* be removed from schools under its jurisdiction because the stories concern only "middle-class rabbits".

How happy Thomas Bowdler would be with all of this. After years spent in medicine, travel and philanthropy and some study of the education of children, Bowdler set out in 1818 to "purify" the works of Shakespeare, striking from them "those words and expressions . . . which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family". The word "bowdlerize" was first used in print in 1836 and became a term of abuse, although the process of expurgation that it represents is clearly still with us.

Physician-author Richard Asher believed that hedging, fudging and euphemism were very much a part of medicine. Describing the modern hematologist in 1959 Asher referred to him as someone who "instead of describing in English what he can see, prefers to describe in Greek what he can't".

Asher went on to say that if physicians don't know something, they don't admit it; instead, they try to confuse their listeners by using what he called "medspeak". One such smokescreen, Asher said, involves the physician's abandoning plain English "in an attempt to appear learned, 'upbeat' or succinct and, in the process, to hide. In these circumstances, one's 'communication' consists of long words, jargon, abbreviations, equivocations, and other vagaries."

By definition, euphemism means substitution of a favourable for a more accurate but possibly offensive expression. Literally, it means fair of speech. Thus, there are no longer any old people, only "senior citizens"; the poor have become "the underprivileged"; drug addicts are "the chemically dependent"; and children of low intelligence are "exceptional students". And people do not die: they pass away. When they do, they are ministered to not by an undertaker but by a mortician; their burial plot is merely a place of rest, prepared not by a grave-digger but by an interment engineer.

Euphemisms have been referred to as verbal placebos. In his book *The Careful Writer* Theodore M. Bernstein says that "euphemisms are not fig leaves, intended to hide something; they are diaphanous veils, intended to soften grossness or starkness".

The danger in all this — in medicine and elsewhere — is that euphemism leads to obscurity and misunderstanding. Surely we and our language are mature enough nowadays to call a spade a spade, not a horticultural implement.

David Woods
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